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### Silicone Society

Flip through the cable television channels on any given weeknight and it's not uncommon to come across some sort of reality makeover or cosmetic procedure taking place before millions of dedicated viewers. This new trend of reality makeover shows has become wildly popular as American viewers itch to see the night's new misfortunate, flat-chested soul transformed to fit a more ideal standard of beauty. Examples of this new US television drama include the reality show, *Extreme Makeover*, which goes beyond the limits of new lip liner and auburn highlights. The show takes ordinary people with severe insecurities and completely alters their physical appearance through numerous cosmetic surgical procedures. Recently, one discontented schoolteacher received a nose job, a chin implant, and collagen injections, along with a brow lift, an added procedure suggested by her surgeon. Shows such as these seem to be Cinderella stories of sorts, taking misfortunate, "ugly" individuals and improving their appearance so they can feel more accepted in society.

Not only are reality shows proving to be a big hit, but the cable television network, FX, recently debuted a television drama series, *Nip/Tuck*, involving two Miami plastic surgeons and the drama surrounding their private surgical practice. The show proved to be an instant success. It was highest-rated series premier in 2003, attracting 3.7 million viewers (Tanne 295). But this isn't surprising. Who wouldn't be interested in a show that involves scandal, illegal practices, Botox injections, and tummy tucks? These television ratings indicate that America may be looking for more than just nightly entertainment.

The demand for shows such as these supports the idea that Americans are taking a little too much initiative in making life-altering "improvements" to their bodies. The obsession for attaining physical beauty is a trend that is increasingly on the rise, and people aren't stopping at cosmetics to get results. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, nearly 5.6 million women and 1 million men had cosmetic surgical procedures in 2002 alone. ASPS President James Wells, MD

confirms, "People are willing to make an investment in themselves to achieve the look they want. The stability of the surgical numbers illustrates the time and financial investment patients put into a serious procedure ("6.6 Million Americans...")." In fact, the number of cosmetic procedures has increased an astonishing 228% just since 1997.

As the baby-boomer generation is approaching old age, more and more are resorting to desperate measures to hold on to the days of youth. It's difficult to even think of a celebrity past the age of 40 who isn't taking advantage of the benefits of surgical cosmetic procedures. Sharon Osbourne, Cher, Joan Rivers, and Melanie Griffith are just a few celebrities that have refused to accept the emergence of wrinkles and have spent thousands on numerous plastic surgeries. It is beginning to seem that aging is becoming unacceptable in our society today. Wendy Kaminer, writer for *The American Prospect*, says, "Cosmetic surgery is often lauded for boosting self-esteem, although it encourages people to hate themselves for being physically imperfect or looking over 45 (Kaminer 34)." Rather than aging simply being a natural process of life, many people feel that it is something to be hidden. Most of the time, women who put on a few pounds or let the crows feet and laugh lines show are accused of "letting themselves go." And it seems that this mentality will only become more widespread as time continues.

Sadly, more and more people are resorting to cosmetic surgical procedures because of self-esteem issues. In 1999 alone, the year's one million cosmetic procedures included 167,000 breast augmentations, 231,000 liposuctions, 73,000 facelifts, 142,000 eyelid surgeries, and 55,000 tummy-tucks (Kaminer 34). But why this urgent demand to alter God-given features? The answer to this lies in studies done on the correlation between plastic surgery and self-esteem issues. Cynthia Figueroa, Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner, comments, "Satisfaction of the self-esteem needs leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, and adequacy. But thwarting the fulfillment of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, weakness, and helplessness (Figueroa 21)."

Obviously, it is crucial that people feel confident and satisfied with themselves in order to maintain happy, healthy lives, but why do so many people feel that they can't be happy without being able to control their physical appearance? Even plastic surgeons encourage their clients to take advantage of opportunities to change things about themselves that they are dissatisfied with, rather than first trying to convince them to find satisfaction within themselves. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons website states that, "plastic surgery.. encourages and promotes a

strong, positive self-image. Even a small change on the outside can create an extraordinary change on the inside, allowing an individual's self-confidence to flourish ("Psychological Aspects..."). But it seems that beauty today is considered an achievement, rather than being a gift bestowed upon the fortunate. Ugliness is not only a misfortune but is now often seen as a failure.

In fact, sometimes a person becomes so obsessed with the desire to change things about herself and alter her physical appearance that she resorts to having excessive surgeries, which could indicate that she may be avoiding other unhappy things in her life. Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a psychiatric disorder that "consists of a preoccupation with an imagined defect in appearance; if a slight physical anomaly is present, the person's concern is markedly excessive (Figueroa 23)." Patients who have BDD are often found to have suicidal symptoms and use plastic surgery as an outlet to try to find satisfaction with themselves, which indicates that people like this have deeper psychological problems that aren't easily solved with any cosmetic procedure. And this disorder is more common than one might think. In fact, "11.9% of patients seeking dermatologic treatment screened positive for BDD (Figueroa 23)." With numbers like that, it is easy to see why so many people are falling victim to the lure of cosmetic procedures.

The new plastic surgery craze indicates that our society has become so obsessed with outward appearance that it is affecting mood, attitude, personal satisfaction, and success in the workplace. Studies have shown that good-looking people have unspoken advantages over ugly people in life. Barry Harper of London Guildhall University studied 11,000 British 33-year-olds and found that "the pay penalty for unattractiveness was around 15% for men and 11% for women. Overweight women earned 5% less than average... [and] good looks in both sexes mattered especially... in sales jobs where the seller meets the buyer" ("The Right to be Beautiful"). These numbers indicate that the preoccupation with appearance may be leading to a shallower society, one filled people too concerned with being beautiful to concentrate on anything of importance.

Of all the wide array of possibilities, Botox injections have become the most popular way to defy the forces of gravity and aging. Since its FDA approval in 2002, Allergan, the company that produces Botox, has increased sales by 30% from the year before (Mendez 64). Susan K. Mendez, a Certified Plastic Surgical Nurse, says "The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery listed Botox cosmetic injections as the fastest-growing cosmetic treatment performed by surgeons in the U.S." Botox, or Botulinum toxin, "is a neuromuscular blocking agent produced by Clostridium Botulinum, an anaerobic bacterium (Mendez 64)."



When first discovered, it was reported to cause paralysis through the ingestion of contaminated food. The paralyzing effect of Botox is caused by blocking the release of acetylcholine at the neuromuscular junction (Mendez 64). The fact that Botox is basically a poison, paralyzing facial structures to diminish wrinkles and saggy lines, makes it difficult to believe that anyone would voluntarily have the substance injected into his/her body. But this quickly growing trend does not involve surgery, which may be one reason for its widespread popularity, in fact, the media has even reported the occurrence of "Botox parties," which involve a practitioner administering injections to party goers while they sample hors d'oeuvres (Mendez 64). The procedure is minimally invasive and is administered through shots to the desired area, which is appealing to those who aren't quite willing to go under the knife. The easy accessibility of this procedure as well as its affordability is what makes this the "wonder drug" of this decade. Botox may be easy to come by, but its effects don't last long. New injections must be administered anywhere from every two to six months, which could develop into a costly indulgence. Many people, however, consider the costs and risks well worth the results.

Women, especially, often fall subject to these feelings of inadequacy and feel that they have to live up to a higher standard of physical attractiveness in order to feel confident about themselves. In fact, the prime targets for all cosmetic procedures are American women between the ages of thirty and sixty-four (Solomon 7). Of course the media's representation of what is considered beautiful doesn't help to build anyone's confidence or sense of self worth. Countless magazine beauty ads and commercials for new cosmetic products force images of "beauty" in the faces of American women daily. With this kind of pressure from the media, what woman wouldn't feel it necessary to correct every slight imperfection on her body?

Although pressure from the media may explain women's obsession with being beautiful, it in no way excuses it. People need to stop depending on beauty to provide a sense of worth and instead focus on their own talents, personality, and gifts that make them individuals. If everyone was blessed with beauty, there would be nothing particularly special or outstanding about it, which makes it clear that the recent advancements in the cosmetic surgery industry may be better suited for reconstructive or corrective purposes only.

However, the line between reconstructive and cosmetic surgeries is a thin one, and many times, cases fall into the gray area. How can one accurately determine which surgeries are considered to be for vanity purposes only and which ones are truly necessary in order to make a

person feel "normal"? For example, a child born with a cleft lip or any other physical deformity can suffer years of torment from others around them and can feel inferior to their peers. In cases such as these, it's hard to argue against plastic surgery as the solution. And since so much technology is available to us, it only makes sense that people should be able to take advantage of its use in cases where it is seriously needed.

But the fact is that whether needed or not, plastic surgery is available to anyone willing to part with a few thousand bucks. Therefore, since the possibilities of being beautiful have increased, people will continually feel pressured to live up to intensified standards of beauty. Plastic surgery will inevitably continue on its steadily increasing path, while natural beauty becomes more of a rarity. And sadly, it may soon be hard to spot a natural, enhancement-free face in any crowd.

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